On Quiet Conversation: Ethics and the Art of Self-Conversation

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To converse is not merely to speak. It involves both speaking and listening. It establishes a relation between what is said and what is heard. One can talk to another, one can even be in a dialogue with another but need not necessarily be in conversation with the other. To hold a conversation with more than one person is a much more demanding task, for if conversing is to establish a relation between what is said and what is heard then such a relation has to be established between more than one participant in the conversation.

What kind of a relation is this between speaking and hearing? Between what is spoken and what is heard? One kind of such a relation is automatic response. Such a response arises when one responds on immediately hearing the words of the other. Conversing is also a special kind of this relation. The response that characterises a conversation is based on understanding, not merely linguistic understanding but also involving knowing what is not said by the other. Thus, it is a relation not only to the verbalised language of the other but also to the domain of the unsaid which is part of what is said by the other. Such a possibility of accessing the unsaid, of verbalising the unsaid, is predicated on the idea of empathy essential to the notion of understanding in this context.

Thus, the dominant element of conversing lies in bringing out the unsaid of one by the other and vice versa. What characterises conversations is the ability of one to voice what the other has not said. And that is why conversation is as much about the silence inherent in every conversation as it is about verbal communication. Such an awareness of the making of conversation also indicates another essential characteristic of it—its multi-semiotic character. Conversation is not and cannot only be about talking and listening to spoken words. The silence and the decoding of the unsaid so essential to conversation is made possible through ‘reading’ (listening?) non-verbal gestures, moods and emotions that accompany the spoken word.

With these preliminary remarks, I will engage with a specific question: What distinguishes conversing with oneself from conversing with others? It will be my contention that the process of conversing with oneself is what teaches us how to converse with others. Perhaps more importantly, I will present an argument as to why this idea of self-conversation is the originary impulse to ethics. Our idea of ethical conduct is based on the model of self-conversation.

Self-conversation

Do we converse with ourselves? We all know that we talk to ourselves. We hear ourselves. We can have a dialogue within us. But conversation, as suggested earlier, is more than just speaking and listening. It arises in the silence between these two acts and invokes the notion of understanding. What distinguishes conversation and self-conversation?

What other similar activities do we do with ourselves? One could sing to oneself. One could talk to oneself. Thinking is also another such similar activity. While thinking, are we talking to ourselves? Are we conversing with ourselves? Thinking is not conversing, although it is ‘internal’. We think ‘inside’ us. We hear the thoughts that arise in thinking. I tend to, for the most part, accept that thinking is inherently associated with speaking and hearing. Another way of stating this claim that thoughts are only linguistic is to say that we hear thoughts. Not only this, but our access to our thoughts is only by listening to them. I hear, therefore I think.

However, thinking by itself is not self-conversation although these two are closely related. Self-conversation is indeed a process
of thinking but not all thinking is a process of conversation with oneself. For example, sporadic thoughts or a random sequence of thoughts are not conversations. If conversation is a response then self-conversation is a sequence in which each thought responds to the other. But, as suggested earlier, we should note that conversation is a specific kind of response, one which is more than mere verbalisation.

What does it mean to converse with oneself? Is there a simultaneity of speaking and hearing? Do I hear at the same moment as I speak to myself? Is there any difference when compared to speaking 'out'—speaking to another person or speaking aloud? For those with normal auditory capacity, they hear what they speak—whether internally or externally. And the hearing follows speech in both cases in the same manner.

How is the phenomenology of inner and outer speaking different? In the outer case, we hear the sounds made by us. Those around us, under appropriate conditions, can also hear us. The sound is primary and hearing follows the sound. When I speak I do not hear the words I speak internally; I hear them through the outside. And this hearing follows the speaking.

When we speak to ourselves, do we hear after we speak? Does hearing follow speech in the case of internal hearing? Often it is difficult to distinguish between speaking and hearing when we do it internally. It is the same as the difficulty in distinguishing between thought and its verbalisation since our thoughts always seem to arise in us as linguistic terms. Thus, in the phenomenology of the speaking self, hearing and speaking are not necessarily sequential.

Another way of understanding this is illustrated by the act of listening externally. In this case, we cannot know what we will hear and we have to wait till something is spoken before hearing it. Thus, hearing is about the act of anticipation, of extending oneself (not one's senses!) in order to hear the asyet unspoken. It is this character of hearing that captures our capacity to be involved in conversations because conversation embodies this basic character of careful hearing: anticipating and extending oneself to the unspoken.

How is this accomplished in self-conversation? Does the self pause in moments of speech and anticipate what it is going to say? Does it extend itself, waiting to hear the unspoken? Can there be such modes in the activities of the self?

It might seem that we can, in principle, never wait to hear ourselves. It might seem odd to say that we are waiting to hear what we are going to say. In listening to another, I am in the state of waiting to hear what the other person is going to say. The other person perhaps knows what he or she is going to say but I don't. It is this pause between what the person has said and what she is going to say that leads to anticipation. The implication is not that speech does not proceed in a continuum. There can be uninterrupted speech—we can imagine a non-ending tape of a collection of words with no pause in between. But such speech cannot be an element of a conversation. Therefore, it is not in speech alone that one finds the character of conversation but in the spaces between speech utterances. Discontinuities, therefore, mark conversation.

This notion of anticipation is a problematical issue in the case of self-conversation. Since the speaker is also the listener, what does it mean to say that I am waiting to hear what I am going to say? Let me consider two potential responses to this problem. One is to say that such a problem does not arise at all since I do not wait to hear what I might be saying later on. Saying just happens and since saying and hearing are contiguous when talking to oneself there is really no waiting to hear what the next words are. However, this means that the notion of anticipation, so integral to conversation and to listening to others, is not recovered in the same way in talking to oneself as in talking to others. Moreover, we do experience anticipation related to our own thoughts and actions. It is not only that we anticipate others in the sense that we can guess at what others do but we anticipate ourselves too. So both in this meaning of anticipation as well as in the meaning of waiting, we do have an experience of anticipation within ourselves.

The other response would be to say that we can in principle not know what we are going to say and that we should and do in fact wait and anticipate what we are going to tell ourselves. Such a view would normally be based on a presupposition that there is some notion of self which is in some sense related to conscious
thought and that there is an agency to self which is what makes thoughts possible. This means that even our present thought and the thought that is yet to come are already grounded in the prior action of the self. This would then imply that talking to oneself and waiting to listen to oneself are actually only verbalisations of a thought which is in principle outside language. Such a view is closer to certain traditional views that consider ideas as being outside language and verbal thoughts as being one representation of them. If we invoke this view, then we could say that speaking and listening are merely verbal representations but the ideas which they represent are already present before they are verbalised. This would imply that in principle we can know what we are about to say. If so, this is a very different process as compared to listening to another where such a possibility does not exist.

If self-talking is to be a conversation then it has to be characterised not just by responses to thoughts that we have but also by silences between thoughts, and by the influence of moods and emotions on the meaning of the conversation. There is an immediate problem that should capture our attention here: While silence is possible when conversing with another, what does it mean to say that there is silence between our thoughts? Does silence in the context of conversation with another mean no verbal communication? But such a silence does not preclude thoughts that arise in our minds during a conversation. Silence offers a moment of introspection and thus adds another dimension of meaning to the linguistic utterances in a conversation. In other words, silence that characterises conversation need not be silence within oneself. In such a case, what does silence imply in the case of self-conversation?

There are at least two modes in which self-conversation is possible: reading and writing. When I read something I am reading to myself and for myself. Reading is always to hear the read although most times we may read without consciously recognising that we are reading to ourselves and listening to what we read. This may lead us to consider this possibility: the sense that is concerned dominantly with reading is not really perception but our internal auditory capacity. In principle, reading is about reading to oneself and thus seeing what is being read is only one possible way to read to oneself. For example, reading a Braille text is also to read to oneself although there is no visual perception involved in this case. When I say that reading is actually listening I am not claiming that listening is the only way to meaning. What happens when we read a script which we cannot decipher? It is true that we do read the text in this case also if by reading we only mean a visual recognition of what is written. But if by reading we mean deciphering meaning of a verbal text then we are immediately in the domain of hearing. In other words, while we do see without the idea of meaning, we cannot have meaning of what we see without first reading aloud to ourselves.

If we expand our discussion to include the other representations of writing such as scribbles, artistic works and so on, we can argue that there is really no reading to ourselves that happen in such cases. We cannot read a work of art to ourselves. We only see it and respond to it. However, note that such response is verbal and in the context of meaning making of such artworks we might still be involved in listening to the verbalisation of our thoughts. However, this is not a question that is of specific relevance only to the problem of self-conversation but is about the nature of thoughts and whether there are non-verbal thoughts in the case of responses to art and music, for example.

Reading allows us an entry into the possibility of self-conversation. We are indeed in conversation with ourselves when we read or to put it less assertively; self-conversation is available to us potentially in any act of reading. Perhaps what we mean by careful reading is an instance of self-conversation even though all reading might not be.

As for reading, so also for writing. The act of writing can be instantaneous or deliberate, that is, conscious and reasoned. In any such process we are in the act of self-conversation because we are only in communication with ourselves and while doing so take our views seriously enough to consider it in all seriousness. Is this only true for analytical writing? I do not think it can be restricted to this kind of writing alone. Even creative writing exhibits a process of self-conversation. In fact, perhaps even a more intense self-conversation! Writing can be seen as self-conversation because the moment of writing down a thought brings silence to the foreground and there is much in writing that is essentially involved with silence.
What makes careful reading and writing processes of self-conversation is not the sequence of thoughts that are understood or recorded. It is the inherent gaps between thoughts, the space of mood and emotions that are essential to these acts that make them a process of self-conversation. Both these activities are anticipatory in nature. Good writing represents anticipation of what is to come. Furthermore, it establishes the foundation that makes anticipation possible.

These examples of reading and writing as well as being in conversation with oneself illustrate another important difference between conversation and self-conversation. The basic difference is that the other with whom the conversation is being conducted is 'outside' the self. One way in which this outside is represented is through the medium that separates the self from the other—a physical space through which sound is transmitted, for example. This separation or the gap or the chiasm is essential to conversation, not just for the physical act of transmission of some sound or information but also because it marks the character of conversation, it makes possible the anticipation within oneself. This space marks the process of waiting that is essential for anticipation.

In the case of self-conversation there is no 'physical' gap between the participants in the conversation since it is the 'same' self that is involved in the conversation. Our access to our inner conversation is mediated through the body and not through the space between the hearer/speaker. The possibility of self-conversation indicates first the possibility of the distance between the self and itself. The multiplicity of the self is first indicated to us through this capacity to converse with ourselves. In other words, it is not that conversation is possible because there is a notion of difference between the participants of the conversation but it is because there is conversation, self-conversation, that we recognise the distance between the self and itself.

**Self-conversation and the Origin of Ethics**

Why should we be concerned with the nature of self-conversation? It will be my contention that the origin of ethics is through our awareness of conversing with ourselves. Our primary ethical response, in contrast to Levinas for instance, does not arise from the confrontation with the other but from confrontation with the other of our-self. Moreover, this confrontation is of a special kind—it is that which is captured by self-conversation. It is from this act that our primary ethical awareness arises.

This claim can be challenged on many grounds. One can see in this approach a similarity to the attempt to find biological origins for human ethics. The relationship between biology and ethics becomes more complex when we consider the field of evolutionary ethics. Briefly, evolutionary ethics is part of the attempt to ground human morality in biology, such as answering why humans are ethical in the first place, whether they are egoistical or whether altruism is an inherent characteristic of humans. One way to answer these questions is to invoke evolution and claim that evolutionary process enhances our capacity to be ethical. For example, proponents of such views would hold that altruism could be a product of natural selection. One way to justify this view is to say that collective behaviour is better than individual competition and thus over time the tendency to collective behaviour gets genetically strengthened. However, such biological mechanisms are not really like ethical imperatives. If we believe in evolution, then these are natural processes, the way the world really is. If ethics is about what one ought to do given the way the world is, then evolutionary ethics is not really about ethics.

There is another way of understanding the relation between ethics and the human, which is the approach through embodied cognitive science. Francisco Varela exemplifies such a tradition. In his book of lectures titled *Ethical Know-How*, he explicitly connects ethics with knowledge. The first lecture begins by stating, 'Ethics is closer to wisdom than to reason, closer to understanding what is good than to correctly adjudicating particular situations.' Such a view should be understood in opposition to certain traditional accounts of ethics which situated ethics mainly as a series of rational judgements about hypothetical situations. Varela's take on ethics is to invert this move. To understand ethics is to first understand actions because one of the essential human characteristics is to act and act

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spontaneously. To start off, Varela begins by defining a wise or virtuous person to be one 'who knows what is good and spontaneously does it'. In reaction to the traditional understanding of ethical behaviour as a form of judgement, Varela asks, 'Why should one conflate ethical behavior with judgement?' Instead, we can begin by considering action, actions that fill and inform our daily practices.

But this does not mean that Varela rejects the notion of judgement apparently inherent in ethics. All that he wants to draw our attention to is that we should first acknowledge the prior movement of ethics which is grounded in spontaneous action. Thus, his enquiry is to start with such actions and see whether it can give us an analysis of the difference between 'spontaneous coping and rational judgement.' He articulates this distinction further as know-how, which is associated with spontaneous coping, and know-what, which is associated with rational judgement.

Varela uses the notion of knowledge as enaction, along with the theory of embodied cognition, to further his arguments. Embodiment implies the following for Varela: (1) cognition dependent upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities; and (2) individual sensorimotor capacities that are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological and cultural context. Following this, he articulates his enactive approach to cognition, which allows us to understand perception in a more complex manner. Varela notes that the enactive approach points to two important aspects of perception: (1) that perception consists of perceptually guided actions; and (2) that cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided.

In the enactive picture the world is not given to us but it is enacted. Cognition is not mere representation but consists of embodied actions. This leads Varela to suggest that there are two important cognitive modes: immediate coping and deliberation/analysis. This parallels the distinction between know-how and know-what. Immediate coping and spontaneous action reside in the world of know-how, where we function as habitual agents without deliberate thought. Know-how is also related to action, our capacity to keep doing something without reflection. Since most of our life, according to Varela, consists of this immediate coping and acting, it is necessary that ethics be grounded in such activities also. Deliberation and analysis, one of the two important cognitive modes, is closely related to self-conversation. In fact, self-conversation is the model that describes the process of deliberation and analysis within oneself. Thus, even for this cognitive approach we can understand the central role of self-conversation.

The traditional accounts of ethics do not explain the ethical acts involved in immediate coping and spontaneous action. Enactivist theory attempts to rectify this omission. Varela draws upon Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism to illustrate how their ethical understanding are enactive in character by focusing on the problem of ethical coping and not on ethical judgment. Consistent with the middle way characteristic of one school of Buddhism, and following Mencius, Varela suggests that 'because truly ethical behavior takes the middle way between spontaneity and rational calculation, the truly ethical person can, like any other kind of expert, after acting spontaneously, reconstruct the intelligent awareness that justifies the action.'

Just as Varela wants to ground ethics in spontaneous action I am claiming that ethics can be grounded in the act of self-conversation. One might claim that self-conversation is itself a spontaneous act but this might be pushing the meaning of action too far, especially for those who want to understand cognition in terms of embodiment. But this analysis shares a common space with Varela's in that it tries to understand the origins of ethics not in terms of ethical laws and principles or in terms of imposed norms by an external society or community but entirely in terms of a specific human activity which has to do with our capacity to converse with ourselves. Unlike Varela's and other embodied views, the emphasis on self-conversation privileges not necessarily the body but the role of conversation and language in the origin of ethics. (One can place these capacities including that of language within an embodied theory but that does not change the claims of my argument.)
An essential ethical element that makes us understand self-conversation as the primary model of ethics is that of ‘quietness’. There is something in the nature of being quiet that is actually related to ethical behaviour. The sense of quiet alluded to here is not in opposition to being boisterous or lively. It is the sense of quiet that characterises serious conversation. Taking another seriously is also to let the other person have the freedom and the space to articulate what she wants. Silence, as we saw earlier, is already an integral part of this conversational space. Being quiet is to learn to speak within silence without negating this silence.

And what is so special to self-conversation is that all self-conversations are quiet conversations. When we converse with another, we can conceivably think of occasions when a serious conversation becomes a violent one! But, in self-conversation, we are always speaking quietly to ourselves.

In other words, the decibel level of our internal voice seems to be quite constant and on the quiet side. While I can increase the loudness of my speech which is projected into the outer world it seems to be the case that my thoughts, which I am acquainted with only through hearing them ‘inside’, are of a constant decibel level. This is surely a mysterious phenomenon.

My thoughts have a voice: my voice. It is the same voice that I hear when I speak out into the world and which I hear through my ears. Also, I hear my thoughts at exactly the same pitch and loudness. The way I hear my thoughts does not vary. Whether I am thinking deeply about something, or thinking what to do next or what to eat, the thoughts all ‘sound’ to me to be at the same register. When I am angry and shout, my words may sound very loud to my ears but my thoughts related to that act of anger are not at the same decibel level. And the level of loudness by which I hear my thoughts is not only constant but it is just above the minimum level needed for hearing.

This should make us ask: are there thoughts which are verbalised but which are not heard by us? Or is there something which makes us hear our thoughts at one constant decibel level, a level which is not too loud (imagine all our thoughts being very loud!), a level which just about makes us aware of our thoughts, and which does not vary with our external vocalisation of them.
(It may be worthwhile here to note that some psychological disorders are associated with hearing loud internal voices.)

Thus, what characterises thoughts as heard by us, as manifested to our selves, is their quietness. All our thoughts are heard by us as if they are quietly uttered. However agitated we are, our thoughts are still heard by us in a quiet manner. It is not too much of a fancy to imagine that it is this sense of quietness which characterises conversations and self-conversations. It is this sense of quietness which gives us the first model of how to talk to oneself, how to deal with oneself and so on, which then allows us to conduct similar conversations with others. It is not just that we cannot shout in outer space but we cannot first shout in our inner space. Quietness qualifies self-ethical mode. This leads us to consider the possibility that our idea of ethics derives not from external norms, not from universal principles but from this primal act of being in and learning to have quiet conversation with ourselves.

References